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Abzug mail was opened by CIA

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Washington — Representative Bella S. Abzug (D., N.Y.) yesterday revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency had opened her mail and kept a file on her anti-Vietnam war activities.

The disclosures by the New York congresswoman were made during testimony by William E. Colby, director of the CIA, before the House Subcommittee on Information and Individual Rights, which is chaired by Mrs. Abzug.

Mr. Colby, who recently has been defending the CIA before various Capitol Hill committees, received his most hostile reception from the New York Democrat, who glowered from beneath the brim of her sombrero hat and over her spectacles as she accused the intelligence agency of being "super snoops."

Mrs. Abzug brandished before the packed hearing room a file sent to her on the previous evening by Mr. Colby containing material collected by the CIA about her as far back as 1953. On two occasions, in 1953 and 1960, the CIA opened letters sent by Mrs. Abzug to Russia in her capacity as lawyer for an American woman seeking to obtain "family tree" information for estate purposes.

Also in the CIA files on Mrs. Abzug was a report on meetings with a Viet Cong group in Paris, her attendance at a Women's Strike for Peace conference in 1967 and an anti-war speech in New York in 1971.

Mr. Colby did not attempt to defend the agency's interference with Mrs. Abzug's mail beyond noting that in the Fifties and Sixties there had been routine opening of mail to Communist countries, a practice he attributed to the political climate of the cold war period.

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The intelligence director conceded there were things in Mrs. Abzug's file that should not be there. But he added, "Some of them are legitimate." He emphasized that the interest of the agency had not been in Mrs. Abzug but in her contacts with persons about whom the CIA was concerned in the course of its legitimate operations.

The congresswoman's voice rose to a stentorian pitch as she assailed the opening of her mail as "clearly illegal." She declared that to find herself in an intelligence file because of her work on behalf of the peace movement was "outrageous and repugnant."

"Are you suggesting that something in that file shows I was involved in anything improper?" she demanded of the director.

Mr. Colby assured her that was not the case but refused to concede that the agency had, as she put it, "violated her privacy."

The CIA director, who remained imperturbable throughout four hours of questioning, insisted that it was "perfectly proper" for the agency to carry out surveillance on foreign groups such as the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

The appearance in files of the names of Americans in contact with such organizations was merely "incidental," he asserted.

Mr. Colby said that Mrs. Abzug was one of four members of Congress whose names appeared in CIA files as a consequence of anti-war activities. He did not identify the others, but said that files would be made available to those who requested them.

The CIA director conceded the agency had concluded by

the late Sixties and early Seventies that there had been no substantial manipulation of the American anti-war movement by foreign intelligence agencies. But he insisted that investigations of Americans involved even peripherally with such groups were necessary to reach such a conclusion.

In a 22-page statement made to the subcommittee, Mr. Colby disclosed that the CIA maintains an elaborate filing system which includes names of many American citizens as well as resident aliens. It involved persons who had offered help to the agency as well as those suspected of foreign intelligence links, he noted.

On the ground that the names of many persons appeared only incidentally and were not the subject of actual files, he refused to estimate the number of Americans on whom files are kept by the CIA. He did not mention the reported files on 10,000 Americans acquired in the process of the CIA's probe into the anti-war movement.

And the director stressed several times the specific orders given within the CIA in August, 1973, and March, 1974, which outlined and forbade the collection of "improper" information. Those orders, he said, were still classified, but

had been turned over to the White House commission investigating the CIA and would also be made available to the Senate and House committees inquiring into allegations of illegal activities within the intelligence community.

Mrs. Abzug clearly remained unconvinced by the arguments of Mr. Colby, and was reluctant to accede to his request that CIA intelligence sources and methods should be exempted from the Privacy Act of 1974, which is due to go into effect shortly.

However, there were signs that other members of the subcommittee were more sympathetic to the problems of the intelligence agency. Representative Sam Steiger (R., Ariz.), describing himself as a "redneck, simplistic farmer," suggested that the problem boiled down to security versus privacy.

"We hear a lot about how heinous it is to snoop, but it occurs to me that for the great majority of Americans, including Mrs. Abzug, it ought to be a source of as much comfort as aggravation to know the CIA is alert and observing," the Arizona Republican said.

Mr. Steiger contended that no other country would subject its intelligence service to what the CIA is now going through.

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